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Flying the Coop

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Book World

MiG PILOT: The Final Escape of Lieutenant Belenko. By John Barron

(Reader's Digest/McGraw-Hill. 224 pp. $10.95)

Lieutenant Viktor Ivanovich Belenko, a young Soviet jet pilot, flew his Mig-25 to Japan one September morning in 1976 and announced calmly that he wanted asylum in the United States. The Kremlin was mortified. It pleaded, cajoled, bargained, threatened and accused everyone in sight to get Belenko back, and then shut up—undoubtedly to carry out a massive purge of all who might remotely be deemed responsible.

Not that the Soviets can really be blamed for being so upset. Can you imagine what the fuss would be in Washington if one of our most skilled aviators flew one of our most advanced air weapons into Moscow's embrace? The difference between the two societies is that here the scandal would be played out in full view with drum rolls and fanfare, and there, we didn't have a clue then and still don't as to the consequences of Belenko's escape. I am certain they have been considerable.

Probably the most remarkable feature about the episode is that Belenko —indeed, anyone—would do something so dangerous personally and so damaging to his country. Imagine the price to Belenko had he failed. It is one thing to hand partial documents to a foreign power, quite another to turn over (for full investigation and examination) the latest in hardware.

Motivation, therefore, is what should be fascinating about this account of the Belenko affair. Instead what comes through is a man who found the Soviet system increasingly intolerable despite the lavish resources expended on him as an elite warrior. After an unhappy childhood and with an unsatisfactory marriage, Belenko just made a run for it in the only way open to him—a surprisingly mundane explanation for so daring a deed.

The most interesting aspect of the book is an unexpected one. Given the current heightened concern in the United States over Soviet military prowess, there is something reassuring about the dreary picture of pettiness and inepititude that Belenko's writer, John Barron, describes as the backdrop and background to his story.

Several years before his flight, already an advanced pilot, Belenko thinks to himself:

"Why doesn't anything work? Why doesn't anything change? It's barely 10 years before 1980. But we're no farther along toward True Communism than we were when they first started talking about it. We're never going to have True Communism. Everything is just as screwed up as ever. Why?"

If things really are as bad as Belenko/Barron claim, then our worries about the Soviets may be exaggerated. Just as we publicize our every military flaw and weakness, the Soviets keep all theirs secret. Though this was probably not its purpose, "Mig Pilot" serves the useful social purpose of pointing out that the Russians have serious troubles too.

On the whole "Mig Pilot" is a modest book, plainly based on long interviews with the pilot, CIA cooperation and newspaper clippings. There is nothing deep or particularly moving about the portrait of Belenko that emerges or the way he reacted to his adventure and then adapted here.

The excitement of a good yarn is unavoidable, but the book is ordinary in tone and uninspired in execution. I kept thinking there must be more to this saga than Barron is telling us. Maybe it would make a better movie.